WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A device for retracting tissue to provide access to a spinal location within a patient, said device comprising:

an elongate body having a proximal end and a distal end and defining a length between the proximal and distal ends such that the distal end can be positioned inside the patient adjacent the spinal location, said elongate body comprising a generally oval shaped proximal portion and an expandable distal portion; and

a passage extending through the elongate body between the proximal and distal ends, said passage being defined by a smooth metal inner surface extending substantially entirely around the perimeter of said passage between the proximal and distal ends;

wherein said elongate body is expandable between a first configuration sized for insertion into the patient and a second configuration wherein the cross-sectional area of said passage at the distal end is greater than the cross-sectional area of said passage at the proximal end.

2. The device of Claim 1, wherein said distal portion is generally oval shaped in the first configuration.

3. The device of Claim 1, wherein said proximal portion and said distal portion comprise discrete members.

4. The device of Claim 1, wherein said distal portion comprises a first member and a second member.

5. The device of Claim 1, wherein said distal portion comprises a first overlapping portion and a second overlapping portion, the first and second overlapping portions defining an overlap area, wherein the extent of overlap area is reduced when said distal portion is in the second configuration.

6. The device of Claim 1, wherein said proximal portion is pivotable relative to said distal portion.

7. The device of Claim 1, wherein said distal portion comprises a first dimension of about 24 mm and a second dimension of about 35 mm when said elongate body is in said first configuration.

8. The device of Claim 1, wherein said distal portion comprises a first dimension of about 45 mm and a second dimension of about 70 mm when said elongate body is in said second configuration.

9. The device of Claim 8, wherein said distal portion comprises a first dimension of about 24 mm and a second dimension of about 35 mm when said elongate body is in said first configuration.

10. The device of Claim 1, wherein said proximal portion has a cross section having a first dimension of about 24 mm and a second dimension of about 35mm.

11. A device for providing access to a surgical location within a patient, said device comprising:

an elongate body having a proximal end, a distal end, and an inner surface, said inner surface defining a passage extending through the elongate body and through which surgical instruments can be inserted to the surgical location, said elongate body capable of having a configuration when located within the patient wherein the cross-sectional area of said passage at a first location is greater than the cross-sectional area of said passage at a second location, wherein the first location is distal to the second location, said passage capable of having an oblong shaped cross section between the second location and the proximal end.

12. The device of Claim 11, wherein said passage is capable of having a generally elliptical cross section between the second location and the proximal end.

13. The device of Claim 11, wherein said passage is capable of having a non-circular cross section between the second location and the proximal end.

14. The device of Claim 11, wherein the cross section is symmetrical about a first axis and a second axis, wherein the first axis is generally normal to the second axis.

15. The device of Claim 11, wherein the configuration of the elongate body between the first location and the second location is generally conical when the elongate body is located within the patient.

16. The device of Claim 11, wherein the first location is at a distal end of the elongate body, and the second location is at a proximal end of the elongate body.

17. The device of Claim 11, wherein the elongate body is configured to be inserted through the skin of the patient and is sized to provide access to a spinal location.

18. The device of Claim 11, wherein the elongate body is movable from a first configuration to a second configuration when located within the patient, the second configuration providing the cross-sectional area of said passage at a first location greater than the cross-sectional area of said passage at a second location, wherein the first location is distal to the second location.

19. The device of Claim 18, wherein the elongate body is expandable from the first configuration to the second configuration.

20. The device of Claim 18, wherein the elongate body has an oblong shaped cross section at its proximal end at least when the elongate body is in the second configuration.

21. The device of Claim 20, wherein the elongate body has an oblong shaped cross section along substantially the entire length between the proximal end and the second location.

22. The device of Claim 21, wherein said elongate body between the proximal end and the second location has a cross section having a first dimension of about 24 mm and a second dimension of about 35mm.

23. A device for providing access to a surgical location within a patient, said device comprising:

an elongate body having a proximal end, a distal end, and an inner surface, said inner surface defining a passage extending through the elongate body and through which surgical instruments can be inserted to the surgical location, said elongate body being expandable from a first configuration to a second configuration when located within the patient such that in the second configuration the cross-sectional area of said passage at a first location is greater than the cross-sectional area of said passage at a second location, wherein the first location is distal to the second location, said passage capable of having a generally oval shaped cross section between the second location and the proximal end.

24. The device of Claim 23, wherein the cross section is symmetrical about a first axis and a second axis, wherein the first axis is generally normal to the second axis.

25. The device of Claim 23, wherein the configuration of the elongate body between the first location and the second location is generally conical when the elongate body is expanded within the patient.

26. The device of Claim 23, wherein the first location is at a distal end of the elongate body, and the second location is at a proximal end of the elongate body.

27. The device of Claim 23, wherein the elongate body is configured to be inserted through the skin of the patient and is sized to provide access to a spinal location.

28. The device of Claim 23, wherein the elongate body has a generally oval shaped cross section at its proximal end at least when the elongate body is in the second configuration.

29. The device of Claim 28, wherein the elongate body has a generally oval shaped cross section along substantially the entire length between the proximal end and the second location.

30. The device of Claim 29, wherein said elongate body between the proximal end and the second location has a cross section having a first dimension of about 24 mm and a second dimension of about 35mm.

31. A device for providing access to a surgical location within a patient, said device comprising:

an elongate body having a proximal end, a distal end, and an inner surface, said inner surface defining a passage extending through the elongate body and through which surgical instruments can be inserted to the surgical location, `said elongate body capable of having a configuration when located within the patient wherein the cross-sectional area of said passage at a first location is greater than the cross-sectional area of said passage at a second location, wherein the first location is distal to the second location, said passage capable of having a cross section between the second location and the proximal end wherein the cross section is defined by first and second generally parallel opposing side portions and first and second generally arcuate opposing side portions.

32. The device of Claim 31, wherein the cross section is symmetrical about a first axis and a second axis, wherein the first axis is generally normal to the second axis.

33. The device of Claim 31, wherein said elongate body between the proximal end and the second location has a cross section having a first dimension of about 24 mm and a second dimension of about 35mm.

34. The device of Claim 31, wherein the configuration of the elongate body between the first location and the second location is generally conical when the elongate body is located within the patient.

35. The device of Claim 31, wherein the first location is at a distal end of the elongate body, and the second location is at a proximal end of the elongate body.

36. The device of Claim 31, wherein the elongate body is configured to be inserted through the skin of the patient and is sized to provide access to a spinal location.

37. The device of Claim 31, wherein the elongate body is movable from a first configuration to a second configuration when located within the patient, the second configuration providing the cross-sectional area of said passage at a first location greater than the cross-sectional area of said passage at a second location, wherein the first location is distal to the second location.

38. The device of Claim 37, wherein the elongate body is expandable from the first configuration to the second configuration.

39. A method for accessing a surgical location within a patient, comprising:

providing a device comprising an elongate body having a proximal end, a distal end, and an inner surface, said inner surface defining a passage extending through the elongate body and through which surgical instruments can be inserted to the surgical location, said passage capable of having an oblong shaped cross section near the proximal end, and an expanded configuration ;

configuring said elongate body for insertion into the patient;

inserting the device into the patient to the surgical location; and

expanding the device to the expanded configuration, such that the cross-sectional area of said passage at a first location is greater than the cross-sectional area of said passage at a second location, wherein the first location is distal to the second location.

40. The method of Claim 39, wherein the device is inserted laterally to a spinal location.

41. The method of Claim 39, wherein the device is inserted posterolaterally to a spinal location.

42. The method of Claim 39, wherein the device is inserted anteriorly to a spinal location.

43. The method of Claim 39, wherein the device is expanded in a cephalad-caudal direction at a spinal location.

44. The method of Claim 39, additionally comprising inserting an oblong shaped dilator into the patient.

45. The method of Claim 39, wherein the device provides access to perform a spinal fixation procedure.

46. The method of Claim 45, wherein the device provides access to perform a two level posterolateral fixation of the spine.

47. The method of Claim 39, wherein the device provides access to deliver a spinal implant.

48. The method of Claim 47, wherein the spinal implant is a fusion device.

49. The method of Claim 47, wherein the spinal implant is a prosthetic disc.

50. A device for providing access to a surgical location within a patient, said device comprising:

an elongate body having a proximal end, a distal end, and an inner surface, said inner surface defining a passage extending through the elongate body and through which surgical instruments can be inserted to the surgical location, said elongate body capable of having a configuration when located within the patient wherein the cross-sectional area of said passage at a first location is greater than the cross-sectional area of said passage at a second location, wherein the first location is distal to the second location; and

a lighting element coupled with said elongate body to provide light to the surgical location.

51. The device of Claim 50, wherein said passage is capable of having an oblong shaped cross section between the second location and the proximal end.

52. The device of Claim 50, wherein the configuration of the elongate body between the first location and the second location is generally conical when the elongate body is located within the patient.

53. The device of Claim 50, wherein the elongate body is configured to be inserted through the skin of the patient and is sized to provide access to a spinal location.

54. The device of Claim 50, wherein the elongate body is movable from a first configuration to a second configuration when located within the patient, the second configuration providing the cross-sectional area of said passage at a first location greater than the cross-sectional area of said passage at a second location, wherein the first location is distal to the second location.

55. The device of Claim 54, wherein the elongate body is expandable from the first configuration to the second configuration.

56. The device of Claim 54, wherein the elongate body has an oblong shaped cross section at its proximal end at least when the elongate body is in the second configuration.

57. The device of Claim 54, wherein the lighting element has a proximal end and a distal end, wherein the proximal end is coupled with a light source.

58. The device of Claim 54, wherein the lighting element has a proximal end and a distal end, wherein the proximal end is coupled with a mechanical arm.

59. The device of Claim 54, wherein the lighting element is coupled with a support member, wherein the support member extends generally perpendicular to the lighting element.